



# From Whiskey Rebellion to Donald Trump and the Question of Power. An Interview with Isaac Ariail Reed

*The Imagination Collectif (IC) interviewed Isaac Ariail Reed on October 13, 2016, during his visit to Masaryk University in Brno, where he participated in the conference “Identities in Conflict, Conflict in Identities”.*

**IC:** How would you compare the reading and reception of your book *Interpretation and Social Knowledge: On the Use of Theory in the Human Sciences* by American and European audiences?

**IR:** In European sociology, you have this problem that some people are pointing out that theory after the post-modern turn is unrelated to empirical studies. So the book might be read as too pluralistic about how theory relates to empirics, because in fact what we need to be doing as a project of sociology is making sure that the concepts are well grounded in research projects. In US sociology, even in comparative historical sociology, which is beautiful and wonderful and which I love, we have the reverse problem: every project has to have an empirical outcome which is relevant regardless of theory – and the theory is only brought in just as much as you need it to get the work done. The book is trying to prevent both of these situations and to change how we think of the use of theory, but it might be read differently depending on what you think the problem is. So if you think the problem is theoretical balloons flying away, then probably you are thinking, why is he so hard on the realists and why is the book so loosey-goosey about all those theoretical concepts? Other people might think: “Why did you have to come back so avidly to explanation – couldn’t you just open up theoretical interpretation more broadly and not have everything always be an explanation?” – because by doing that you are giving in to the kind of requirements of American sociology.

**IC:** Can you tell us more about your current research?

**IR:** I have started a series of investigations on the sociological concept of power, and I published a few theoretical articles on power and a few historical studies on power. And now I have in process one more paper, which is a kind of outline of a larger research project on power. There is in this paper some attempt to introduce a kind of new vocabulary for thinking about power relations, which is different than either the vocabulary that we have from instrumentalism, but also different from the vocabulary that we have inherited from Gramsci or Bourdieu, which is about hegemony, field, et cetera. The core idea is that we can think of the process of recruiting an ally to pursue a project, and, in particular, sending

an ally to do your project, as the fundamental act of power. Then we can connect the theory of power to theory of the pragmatic actor. I try to outline this very simple definition of power, which is that power is just simply the ability to send and find someone else to act on your behalf, which I try to reconceptualise. Parts of the project would then be inside of that general framework. Then we would think about both structures of power and performative power as ways through charisma and other means, to bind people to your project when you don't have the usual ties.

**IC:** What are the sources of your inspiration in your work with pragmatism? As we understand, that is an important element. You are sort of coming closer from a traditional critical point of view bridging agendas that were separated. You spoke about Bourdieu...

**IR:** So, first of all, this really came upon me by a series of quite empirical problems, which is that I am studying these actors on the very edge of large imperial formations – by the edge, I mean the geographical periphery, the outposts or “frontiers” of empire. So first, at the edge of the British Empire, and then, at the edge of the new USA, which is also an empire. I am trying to figure out how these people act, and when you are at the edge of large formations, the question of how and why you are authorized to act is always a vital one. At the very edge of large power formations, there is always this kind of question, whether you can actually get anyone to do anything “in the King’s interest” and “in the name of the King”.

By studying this I came across this contradiction. Some of the scholars studying empire make the argument that the empire should be thought of in terms of fields, and I disagree. This connected me to the theoretical problem, which is completely upon us in theory, which is that we have Bourdieu and that we have the French pragmatists. And they appear as opposite poles but actually the fundamental problem for pragmatism is how to start from a pragmatic theory of action but develop from that a theory of organizations, institutions, and hierarchies that are relatively stable. The question is: How it can be, given how much the world is in flux, that there is a certain kind of stability to some social orders? And then of course, there is always a Bourdieusian question, which is how the forms of domination are simultaneously social and symbolic. Especially in the USA, pragmatist sociology has not always paid much attention to semiotics or interpretation. So I hope that will be my contribution.

From the point of view of agency theory – and here I am drawing directly from one of my teachers, Julia Adams – when you send someone as your agent, you exercise power. And this is a really important idea, because it gives you a way to think in the space in between the structuralism of the sociology of power relations, fields, etc. and the view that there are just actors, giving justifications for their doings. Actually, most of the time, when actors are giving justifications for what they are doing, what they are actually doing is pointing to some more powerful actor, who is part of their justification, because they are an ally in the project of the powerful actor. I share a pragmatist approach to action, but I understand the pragmatists as not sufficiently attentive to the fact that the justifications point to hierarchies of power and authority. This takes us into some difficult semiotics. That is my argument.

**IC: How does your empirical research on historical cases on the edges of empires help you develop this argument?**

IR: One beginning for the research is the series of violent crises in 1676 in Virginia, which together are called Bacon's Rebellion.<sup>1</sup> People at the very edge of the Colony of Virginia rebelled against the governor and the governing structure of the Colony. And then 118 years later there is a new American state in 1794, which has another crisis at the edge of its political formation – on the one hand an Indian war and on the other hand an event called the Whiskey Rebellion, in which citizens of the new American state refused to pay taxes on whiskey and burned down the house of the tax collector. In all such cases, the question is, when do people accept authority and how [do] they authorize action? It turns out that to understand the Whiskey Rebellion you have to understand whiskey's pragmatic uses, the way it acts on human beings, and also what it stands for. The men on the east coast who sent Federal troops to crush the Whiskey Rebellion suggested to their own constituents that the participants in the rebellion were drunk and immoral; but out on the western edge of the new USA, whiskey was not only a form of currency and a powerful actant, but also a symbol. Whiskey came to *stand for* a particular understanding of "liberty," in particular independence and anti-tax sentiment.

**IC: So that's where it comes from...**

IR: I've thought about constructing a more popular-facing article about the Whiskey Rebellion and about present day American politics, because there are some interesting similarities. Western Pennsylvania, where the rebellion happened, is also, with the exception of Pittsburgh, expected to vote for Trump. And one sees there the same problems: Why is the American state taxing me? Why is the American state not protecting me from the racial Others that I don't like? These questions are in a certain sense fantasies in the present age, but they are constitutive fantasies.

**IC: Do you see similar things happening in the Democratic camp? For example, the Broadway musical "Hamilton"?<sup>2</sup>**

IR: In the contemporary USA, we have both the inheritors of the Whiskey Rebels' self-understanding – the "Don't tread on me!" white nationalism – and the efflorescence of a politics of colour. The latter has been long developing but it's quite new in its public manifestations. On the other hand, we have the efflorescence of a new white supremacy, where certain forms of white supremacy are more publicly voiced than they were twenty years ago, when in some public spaces it was not as acceptable to be so openly racist. For the longest time in American sociology the major finding was racism without racists: while the public acceptability of open racism declined, racial hierarchy has continued to exist in the basic institutional and organizational structures of the USA. Now, there

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<sup>1</sup> Isaac Ariail Reed. 2013. "Charismatic Performance: A Study of Bacon's Rebellion." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 1 (2): 1–35.

<sup>2</sup> "Hamilton" is a Broadway musical based on the story of Alexander Hamilton, one of the American founding fathers. It was written by Lin-Manuel Miranda. It claims to be a portrayal of the founding fathers by contemporary Americans – multicultural, multiracial, etc. President Barack Obama hosted a performance in the White House which received a great deal of recognition.

is the possibility of a renegotiation of the racial order, maybe an opening, but at the same time the *revanche*...

**IC: What has changed since twenty years ago?**

IR: I don't know; I wish I studied it more. You have to ask sociologists who are really experts on race. There certainly have been major demographic changes in that the percentage of the population that is white is smaller every year, and it is much smaller in big American cities. Then there is a generational change for sure. Meanwhile, the number of white supremacy organizations has gone way up, just since Obama's election. The symbolism of his election had this galvanizing effect on a certain part of the American population who could not accept his political legitimacy.

**IC: You mentioned crisis several times. What do you mean when you say that? Is the definition of a situation as crisis not already a political statement?**

IR: I would say that we have to have both an objective and a subjective understanding of crisis and to combine them. So crisis is both a breakdown of certain institutional and organizational orders, sometimes brought on by economic changes and sometimes by other things. And it is also an interpretation of that breakdown – if it is understood as a crisis in a sense of necessitating a renegotiation of the social order. Some breakdowns are not interpreted as a crisis and so new orders emerge without a kind of subjective recognition. Those are not the same as a crisis that is felt deeply as a crisis. It's a very hard question that I haven't solved at all. I think elite interpretation is very important, however. Because when elite interpretation changes, then you really get this power effect where suddenly they are all saying: "We need a new social order!"

**IC: So is this happening now?**

IR: For example, the inability of the Republican Party to control its nomination process suggests that a standard mechanism of politics has broken down. American political parties are famously powerful. Being able to choose the nominee is something that the parties often are really good at. And they completely and totally failed. So that would suggest that we are looking at a crisis of politics.

**IC: How does your work with historical events become useful in thinking about the present?**

IR: I really do deeply believe that we, doing abstract social theory, should be having conversations about concepts like power in relationship to people conversing about power standing in radically different times and places. And I do think that if we effectively refine our concepts by attending not only to the present but also to the past that our concepts would be better for talking about the present as well. For example, there is a sort of performative violence going on in these videos ISIS is sending on the Internet and of course there has long been an aspect of performative violence in American power abroad. So for example, not only sending soldiers – you know what I mean by performative is not that it's not real, but rather that it is an attempt to create sovereignty in the moment via the act of violence. And I think we can understand a lot of violence around the world at this time in that sense. Rather than it

being a kind of expression of a stable sovereign power, rather it is an attempt to create and sort of instantiate sovereignty in the violent act itself. And this is something that seems particularly prone to happen in chaotic and contingent crisis situations – some of which are far in the past.

**IC: Now the point of criticism to that very powerful agenda you describe would be: How do you read Salem witch trials of 1692 in Massachusetts and forego simplistic instrumental use of that event for the sake of elaborating concepts?**

IR: Well, presumably the account of the event itself has to be mediated precisely by this interpretation of these mentalities you were discussing. My argument has always been that at the level of the explanation, sociologists have to go through the distant meanings of the past as a foreign country – absolutely, that's true. I would argue it is precisely by taking these concepts that are general or abstract through the process of interpretation, that they get better. And I would argue that these radically different mentalities of the past in fact would be incomprehensible to us without some concepts like power. If we are going to talk about the Salem trials and that kind of Puritan conceptualization of gender that mediated them and that gave form to all the movement, we are probably relying on some commonality in the notion of performative power.

**IC: What would be your position in the debate on public engagement of sociologists?**

IR: My book on interpretation would, I think, be a symptom, a part of a larger set of books that all agree that the opposition between doing science and doing politics is too dichotomous. And that there has to be a broader theoretical understanding of the positioning of the intellectual in society. The idea would be that there's some way forward to resolve this issue so that everyone just stops yelling at each other all the time. But this is a big problem. Theoretically speaking, this is really a problem of the post-Marxist left in the US. Some time ago, there was Marxist science and Marxist understanding of politics, and there was a series of ways to relate the two, starting probably with Lukács. And when philosophy of history goes away, you have a problem, because you have no longer a clear understanding of how scientific realism articulates with normative advocacy. So instead, you have a cacophony of voices and people trying to figure out how to move forward. I think Du Bois is going to be a different model for this. He's an example – Du Bois spent twenty years editing a magazine called *The Crisis*, which was and is a public-facing magazine on black issues in the USA – it's the official publication of the NAACP. And so he was a scholar-advocate who did this.

**IC: The recent decision of the British to leave the European Union has been repeatedly linked to the popular refusal of expert knowledge. Do you perceive any decline in the public standing of intellectuals in the US?**

IR: No, because I don't think that the intellectuals ever had much power in the US. Technocracy is always in industry in the US, and not concerned with what's happening in the social sciences. American cultural critics and intellectuals are important, but I don't think that they've lost the power they used to have. On the other hand, the Trump phenomenon is related to Brexit in the sense that there's a portion of the American electorate that doesn't trust the political elite which they perceive to be a knowledge elite.

**IC: To what extent does the Trump phenomenon point to a possible underlying structural change in how politics works in the US?**

IR: Yes, in a sense, the phenomenon that he represents is of the traditional Republican conservative voter, who does not share the economic policies of the business elites – whether Republican or Democrat. They are combining a kind of economic with a kind of cultural alienation. I think that it's important to see the multidimensionality of the Trump phenomenon. It is simultaneously about economic disenfranchisement and a kind of reassertion of whiteness and then also a cultural alienation from the world of a cosmopolitan globalization. The everyday world of the wealthy American cities is multicultural, multiracial, globally open, has norms that we would identify as cosmopolitan – and that cultural world is alienated from that world of Trump voters.

**IC: How would you evaluate the position of the elites?**

IR: One of the things that infuriated me about American media during Trump's rise was how they were constantly talking about how Trump doesn't complete his sentences, about how he speaks in this way that is not appropriate. Every time some journalist pointed out in *the New York Times* that it was so hard to transcribe his speech because it was so all over the place, they played exactly the role they were supposed to play in the performance – that was the rise of Trump. Every time they said "he can never win" they were setting him up to be a charismatic leader – because then, every time that he won, it's a miracle. And as we know about charismatic leaders, they succeed by one miracle after another.

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**Isaac Ariail Reed** is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia, and the author of *Interpretation and Social Knowledge: On the Use of Theory in the Human Sciences* (2011). Other papers referenced in this interview include "Power: Relational, Discursive, and Performative Dimensions" (*Sociological Theory*, 2013), "Between Structural Breakdown and Crisis Action: Interpretation in the Whiskey Rebellion and the Salem Witch Trials" (*Critical Historical Studies*, 2016), and "Deep Culture in Action: Resignification, Synecdoche, and Metanarrative in the Moral Panic of the Salem Witch Trials" (*Theory and Society*, 2015), as well as his book manuscript in progress, on power. He also writes for Public Seminar ([publicseminar.org](http://publicseminar.org)) where he addresses historical trajectories and current politics. Born in Durham (USA) in 1978, he currently resides in Charlottesville with his wife Jennifer and daughter Hannah. His grandparents were married in Prague in 1938.